

Silent Service Packs More Punch

Exercise Tests Spec-War Mission

By Gidget Fuentes

ABOARD USS GEORGIA - For the crew of this ballistic-turned-cruise missile nuclear submarine, the ongoing Silent Hammer experiment isn't just a sea trial.

It's nearly a sea change.

The experiment, which was scheduled to run Oct. 4 through Oct. 14, is examining how special operations forces, including Navy SEALs, can conduct large-scale, joint clandestine missions while operating undersea from a cruise missile-capable nuclear submarine.

To test and flex the power of advanced systems, sensors and technologies installed for command and control, the beefy submarine is spending more time close to the waterline, often in shallow water off San Clemente Island, west of San Diego. For a Trident submarine that's spent 20 years in deep seas on long hunts to track enemy boats, that's a little too close for comfort.

"Shallow water - we used to never go near that," said Electronics Technician 3rd Class (SS) Corey Wood, a 22-year-old former missile technician from New Orleans. "Now we do it on a regular basis, staying at periscope depth for hours on end."

That's quite a change from typical patrols in deep water, where courses are plotted and checked every 30 minutes, a more relaxed pace, especially when standing a six-hour watch. But the Silent Hammer sea trial has required lots of surfacing and diving.

With conditions and depths changing more often, the Georgia's navigators have seen their workload climb exponentially. "If we're plotting every three minutes, you're staring at the clock," said Electronics Technician 2nd Class (SS) Brian Klein, 23, of Phoenix. "It's a little bit more than we're used to."

Silent Hammer program managers also are evaluating how the submarine can launch a "flexible payload module" fired from a

conventional missile tube. A "stealthy, affordable capsule" shot from the submarine missile tube could conceivably release unmanned aerial vehicles, missiles, weapons of other "plug and play" systems in the military's inventory.

Later this year, the Georgia will head to Norfolk Naval Shipyard, Va., to begin its refueling and conversion to SSGN. The Navy will spend \$3.8 billion to convert a total of four Tridents - the Ohio, Michigan and Florida are also on tap - said Cmdr. David M. Duryea, program manager for Advanced Submarine Systems Development at Naval Sea Systems Command and former Florida commander.

Officials say the Silent Hammer experiment holds great promise for joint special operations forces, including Navy SEALs. "This is just one medium for us to work with," said Capt. Rick Bremseth, Naval Special Warfare Group Three commander and NSW Task Group commander for Silent Hammer. "It's a really good one because of its clandestine nature."

SEALs have largely stayed to themselves while planning missions and training but have joined the crew in the lounge for movies. "For the most part, you don't really see them," said Command Master Chief Bob Krzywdzinski, chief of the boat. With ample room on-board, "it's been a non-issue."

But they are here. "They eat a lot," said Culinary Specialist 2nd Class (SS) Joe Kelley. "It is amazing to see how much they eat."

Freezer stocks have shrunk as cooks tap into twice the usual food. Forget midrats; commandos are hungry at 3 a.m., he said. So a refrigerated case is packed with yogurt cups and breakfast burritos, and the soup pot is always full.

"They're going to be as much a part of this as we are," Klein said of SEALs, adding: "They will probably set a standard doing PT while underway."

Navy Subs Get Life Extension

Ships May Be Turned Into Undersea Command Posts

By James W. Crawley

The ballistic-missile submarine Georgia lurks off San Clemente Island. Its missile tubes have been emptied of their nuclear warheads.

A team of Navy SEALs has taken over several compartments and vacant tubes. Contractors and naval engineers have modified other spaces into a battle command center.

The Washington state-based Georgia and its 155-member crew are the centerpiece of a Navy experiment called Silent Hammer.

The Navy is studying ways that four former boomers – the nickname for missile subs – can become stealthy, undersea command posts, surveillance centers and launching pads for hundreds of Tomahawk cruise missiles.

"We're pushing the envelope" for submarines, said Cmdr. Dave Duryea, Silent Hammer project manager.

The trial began a week ago and ends Thursday.

Over the next few years, the Pentagon will convert ballistic-missile subs Georgia, Ohio, Michigan and Florida into nuclear guided-missile submarines, known by the Navy acronym SSGN.

Each submarine's 24 Trident intercontinental ballistic missiles will be replaced by up to 154 cruise missiles. The subs were scheduled for the scrap heap to comply with a strategic arms reduction treaty, but Pentagon planners realized the subs could be converted into launching pads for cruise missiles.

Several other changes are planned, including the modification of two missile silos and several compartments into special chambers and berthing for commandos and their gear. Also, an air lock and a docking hatch for the SEALs' new minisub, called the Advanced Delivery System, will be installed.

Putting Navy SEALs and their minisub aboard the large submarines and newer attack submarines should expand the number and types of missions the commandos can accomplish, said Scott Truver, a naval analyst and group vice president of Anteon Corp. in Washington.

Duryea said that's exactly the purpose of trials such as Silent Hammer.

"We're continuing to work on developing teamwork between special-operations (forces) and submarines," he said.

For Silent Hammer, a prototype battle-management center has been carved out in the Georgia, Duryea said.

"It's the first time to have an embarked commander and staff on a sub who can command and control (special-operations) forces," he said. Because of submarines' stealthy nature and cramped quarters, the undersea vessels have never been command posts.

The sub has room for up to 60 SEALs and their gear – many times the number that could be carried on smaller attack submarines.

Besides Tomahawk missiles, the former ICBM launch tubes, which are 88 inches across and more than 44 feet high, could be loaded with modules containing unmanned aerial or underwater vehicles or other short-range missiles, Duryea said.

"There's a lot of things you can put in those tubes," Duryea said.

Last week, one of Georgia's missile tubes released a capsule containing a mock-up of an unmanned aerial reconnaissance vehicle that is under development. Although no drone was launched, two Navy airplanes orbiting nearby are sending live surveillance video to the submerged Georgia for analysis as part of the experiment, Duryea said.

The submarine exercise also is linked electronically with another Navy trial, Trident Warrior, which is running simultaneously off the West Coast.

Trident Warrior involves San Diego-based amphibious ships Tarawa, Pearl Harbor and Cleveland; the destroyer John Paul Jones; and the cruiser Chosin. The ships are testing new ways to use satellite and computer communications to speed up coordination and attacks by far-flung ships and aircraft.

"The technology being tested is essential to conduct battles in the future," said Rear Adm. Robert Conway, who commands Expeditionary Strike Group 1, based on the Tarawa.

Experiments such as Silent Hammer can benefit the Navy, analyst Truver said, adding, "It is important, and the results need to be addressed honestly and candidly."